

[An Irish Shed Owner's Widow]

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Miss Mary Tomasi

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Montpelier, Vt. The Granite Worker

AN IRISH SHED OWNER'S WIDOW

Her hair was snow white, her figure slender, almost girlish in spite of her seventy-odd years. "It's been such a long time since I've spoken of my husband's granite business—" she murmured. "He's been dead about thirty years. I sold the business as soon as I could, I never liked it anyway."

The house stood in a quiet residential street close to the city's business section. It was a large wooden structure in green and white, gracefully terreted on the east. Vines shaded the semi-circular porch; two rows of blooming irises guarded the stone walk to the kitchen door; box-clipped shrubbery lined the front walk. It made a charming private home. You could understand the elderly woman's faint distaste when she confessed that during the last years of her husband's life it had been necessary to convert the house into a boarding and rooming house for a number of their employees, granite workers.

"I was born here in Vermont," Mrs. Niles said, "But John, my husband, came over from Ireland. He was a young man and already proprietor of a shed when I met and married him. People said he had a fine future, he was a good workman himself and he understood the business thoroughly. He was a hardworking, sober young man those days. We were very happy. He talked granite day and night, I didn't mind its it was good to see him so interested In the business.

It all changed when his uncle died. His uncle had been a carver in Ireland, a skilled one. He'd worked in Barre only five years when his lungs went bad. He and John were very close friends, dearer to each other than most uncles and nephews. His sickness was a blow to John. It seemed to loose some devil in him. He began to drink heavily. Pretty soon it was every day. It wasn't an unusual sight to see a couple of his workmen half carrying him home when the shed closed for the day.

"Of course, business suffered. It had to with a drunken mind supervising it. I tried to talk to him. I told him I understood the friendship between him and his uncle, and respected it, but nothing could bring him back. He had to think of the living. He had to think of his wife and his three children. He wouldn't listen. When one of his employees, a good friend of his, was forced to leave work, too, because of his lungs, it was more than John could bear. He drank more than ever. I suggested putting a manager in the shed, he wouldn't hear of it. Business became so bad that we had to borrow money on the house to put into the shed. We borrowed twice.

"I loved this home. We'd bought it from the people who built it. They owned the old Union House on Main Street. Yes, that was an hotel. I liked the privacy of this house. But an eighteen room house for five people was a burden in those times when little money was coming in. It could be an asset. I saw my duty even though it was a painful one, 3 and I did it. John was so deep in liquor he never even raised a finger to stop me. I went up to the shed one afternoon and talked to every one of the unmarried men. I explained the situation to them, though God knows they must have known it, and told them I would be glad to have any of them as roomers. They were good men, they were eager to help. By the end of the next week six were rooming at the house,- three Irish, two Scotch, and one Italian.

"The extra money was a God-send. I went even further. I boarded them. It was hard work even with a maid, but it was worth it.

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"I had hoped that my willingness to cooperate and my example would serve to straighten John. It didn't. He let go completely. No, he didn't contract stonecutters' T. B., it was drinking that killed him. But I can't help feeling that the granite industry which had taken his uncle and his friend was indirectly responsible.

"After his death I was approached by one of the workmen who assured me that under his management the shed could again be operated on a paying basis. He was a sober minded man and trustworthy, but I'd had enough of the granite industry. I felt it had robbed me of a husband, and the children of a father. I was eager to cover all association with it. When the right opportunity presented itself I sold the shed, and paid back part of the money we'd borrowed on the house.

"Yes, I kept the roomers. The children were growing, I wanted to give them a good education. Neither of the boys 4 lives in Vermont now. One became a civil engineer, the other a doctor. They have both done well. My daughter married a local merchant.

"About twenty years ago she, her husband, and two children came to live with me. She wanted privacy as much as I did, we gave up the roomers. She and her husband paid off the rest of the mortgage. Part of the house really belongs to them now. It's just as well that way. I don't think the boys will ever come back to Vermont. Not to live. They've families of their own, and deeply rooted in their communities.

"There are eight of us in this house now. Five grandchildren, my daughter and son-in-law, and myself. The children are grown. The oldest girl graduated from college last year; the youngest boy will finish high school next year.

"The three grandsons know that their grandfather was in the granite business. They don't seem to be interested in it. I'm glad of that. I seldom speak to them of those past years."